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ABSTRACT

Social scientists in the United States have been reluctant to use ideological/demographic research to explain and predict voting behavior because of criticism from survey researchers that such an approach provides interpretations only of aggregate data, cannot establish a direct causal link between independent characteristics and voting behavior, and fails to adequately explain how individuals make their choices. In Europe, ideological/demographic research has been used to compare political systems in various nations and to assess how political parties develop. It has been a popular approach perhaps because European researchers prefer to develop macroscopic theories of political behavior and because European political parties tend to be homogeneous. However, a resurgence of interest in ideological/demographic research is occurring in the United States because researchers have found that individual level data have not provided a useful basis for theory construction, that survey research may obscure the ability to understand the political system, that computers allow the analysis of very small units, and that new methods of data analysis make it possible to assess the predictive power of several variables simultaneously. In addition, this research approach is potentially useful for communication research during political campaigns. (TJ)

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POLITICAL CAMPAIGN RESEARCH: IDEOLOGICAL-DECMOGRAPHIC

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POLITICAL CAMPAIGN RESEARCH: IDEOLOGICAL-DEMOGRAPHIC

Research which uses ideological and demographic variables to explain and predict voting behavior has a long history. Early research dates from the turn of the century when the first primitive analyses of election results were conducted. In such research an electoral unit such as a commune or precinct is used as the unit of analysis. An attempt is made to interpret how the unit voted in an election by refering to the party membership of unit residents or their demographic characteristics including: age, income, place of birth, religion and occupation. Such analyses are still conducted by journalists attempting to ascertain the types of persons that candidates "appeal" to or the success of a party in "holding" its members. Stokes (1968) cites several early voting studies conducted in Europe. Ogburn and Talbot (1929) conducted a detailed study of the 1928 Presidential election in which Hoover defeated Smith. They found that Smith received more votes in counties which were Catholic, foreign-born, urban, Democrat and favorable to the repeal of prohibition.

The early and continuing appeal of ideological/demographic based research lies in the easy availability of voting statistics and census data. With a minimum amount of effort a researcher can determine whether a candidate did better in the "wealthier or poorer" precincts. Did a Democrat carry the traditionally Democratic counties? Did a Catholic candidate for President succeed in getting votes in Protestant states? Computer technology makes such analyses much easier to conduct. Files of data on electoral units can be collected and utilized to study a variety of election results. Since election results are archived in most areas it is possible to study voting behavior over time to assess whether significant changes have taken place.

Despite the ease with which such analyses can be conducted, U.S. social scientists have traditionally be reluctant to conduct and publish such research. In contrast, European scholars have conducted much research using this approach. Why have U.S. social scientists failed to exploit and develop this approach? In part, this failure may be due to the development of campaign research which uses survey data. In the 1940's and 1950's survey researchers were highly critical of simplistic ideological/demographic studies. They pointed out that such studies can provide only a plausible, post hoc interpretation of aggregate data. This interpretation will tend to be misleading if the aggregated units of analysis (precincts, counties, states) are simply arbitrarily created units which are heterogeneous in composition. Such units cannot be adequately described in terms of summary demographic statistics. For example, a precinct which arbitrarily includes a very rich neighborhood and a very poor neighborhood cannot be said to have an "average" income level. A county having 52% Catholic residents may not be appropriately labeled as a "Catholic county". Another criticism of the ideologial/demographic approach was that it could not establish a direct causal link between the independent ideological/demographic characteristics and the dependent voting behavior. Survey researchers criticized deterministic social structural explanations of voting behavior which failed to adequately explain how individuals actually made their vote choices. They were reluctant to believe that social class or party membership alone could account for voting patterns and instead sought explanations which took into account the attitudes of individuals. Ironically, the theoretical models developed by survey researchers are quite similar to models which might have been developed using the ideological/demographic approach. Attitudes have been found to have relatively little predictive power. Instead, party identification and social class variables have tended to provide

the best predictions of voting behavior.

The criticisms of survey researchers may have severely retarded the development of ideological/demographic research in the U.S. In Europe, this approach is widely used and accepted as a legitimate basis for academic study. In particular it has been utilized as a means of comparing political systems in various nations. For example, such research provides a means of assessing how political parties develop by ascertaining the demographic characteristics of the types of persons who support the party at different points in time. Eric Allardt (1964) has developed an explanation of Communist party development in Finland by examining vote support in several postwar elections in communes having different demographic compositions. He found that the Communists did consistently better in low income and high income areas. There appear to be several reasons why European researchers have continued to develop techniques for using demographic data while U.S. researchers have tended to depend almost exclusively on survey data. European researchers prefer to develop macroscopic theories of political behavior using various conceptions of social structure. These theories can be evaluated using aggregated units of analysis especially when the unit of analysis consists of groups of persons who participate in the same social organizations, ie. a commune. From the point of view of the European researcher, the commune is a more useful and less arbitrary unit of analysis than the individual.

The success of European researchers in using the ideological/demographic approach may be due in part to the nature of the phenomena which they study. European political parties have tended to have rather sharp fluctuations in popular support. Also, they tend to attract homogeneous memberships. In such a situation, demographic information about party vote can provide useful insights into the composition and appeal of a party at different points in time. By contrast, such analyses may tend to be useful only for "third" parties in the U.S. The major parties tend to be heterogeneous in their composition and their support has tended to remain stable. It is not surprising that American researchers have sought to explain this stability by questioning individuals to ascertain their reasons for their habitual actions. Macroscopic social processes involving political or class conflict and social movements received less attention because such phenomena appeared "foreign" or "regressive" to American researchers seeking to understand the amazingly stable post-war US political system.

Several recent trends may produce a resurgence of interest in the ideological/demographic approach. Researchers have found that individual level data and attitudinal variables have not provided a useful basis for theory construction. Survey research based theories failed to provide a basis for predicting and explaining the widespread social unrest and conflict which suddenly appeared in the 1960's. Inadequate socialization appeared to be the only logical explanation for the revolt of the young but why had it occurred in 1965 and not 1955? New, ideologically grounded political organizations proliferated in a society thought to have moved "beyond ideology".

V.O. Key has expressed a growing concern among social researchers that survey based research may actually obscure our ability to understand our political system by directing our attention toward psychological processes

inside individuals rather than group or societal processes. Key has pointed out that survey researchers have their own problems of aggregation. After measuring the thoughts and attributes of individuals, they must determine how these variable "add up" to explain and predict a collective electoral decision.

> "At bottom the tendency of the theory of group or social determinism is to equate the people's choice with individual choice. Perhaps the collective electoral decision, the people's choice, is merely the sum of individual choices. If enough were understood about individual decisions, by addition the collective political decision of the electorate would be comprehended. Yet when attention centers on the individual elector as he is led to decision by compulson of his nonpolitical group, the tendency is to lose sight of significant elements that both affect and relate individual decision to the political aggregate. (Key and Munger, 1959, p.281)"

In an analysis of voting behavior in Indiana, Key and Munger used the ideological/demographic approach to demonstrate that popular survey based theories of voting behavior could not adequately explain voting patterns in Indiana.

New, computer based uses of the ideological/demographic approach are able to avoid some of the shortcomings of earlier research. It is now possible to use very small units of analysis because the computer can efficiently analyze data from many such units. Precincts can be studied rather than counties or states. Also, it is possible to use new methods of data analysis to assess the relative predictive power of various demographic or ideological variables simultaneously. For example, Ruth C. Silva (1962) has used a regression analysis of voting data for the 1928 Presidential election to argue that religion and

prohibition were not significant factors in the defeat of Smith. Her analysis used congressional districts as units of analysis. Regression analysis permitted the relative predictive power of several independent variables to be assessed.

Survey researchers themselves are beginning to recognize the limitations of their past approaches. Warren Miller, director of the election survey research effort at the University of Michigan, has recognized the necessity for broadening present efforts at theory construction and data collection. He points out that (p. 133, 1975) "Students of electoral research have given too little recognition to the fact that their research is mapping a real and changing external world. For one small example, appraisals of mx macrostatistics concerning the rise of political independence and the decline of party identification have too seldom looked to possible causative changes in the societal condition before moving into powerful interpretations of anticipated political consequences."

Future applications of the ideological/demographic approach appear to offer several advantages to researchers. As computer files of election data and census data become more readily available it should become easier to create files of overtime data that permit a wide variety of variable relationships to be objectively assessed. Of course, such findings will rarely be sufficient to evaluate a theory. Other forms of data collection and analysis will be necessary. But as an early means of theory construction or as a supplimental evaluation of theory; the ideological/demographic approach has much to offer.

It is interesting to speculate on the potential usefulness of this approach for communication research. It might be possible to use past mx voting patterns of election units as a means of establishing a "baseline" of typical voting support for party candidates. If a candidate has developed and used campaign messages designed to appeal to certain types of voters, then electoral units that contain those types of voters should show more than the expected level of support. A candidate who promises to increase welfare or medical benefits

should obtain more votes in low income areas.

Great potential appears to exist for integrating ideological/demographic research approaches into research strategies which include more recent approaches. For example, ideological/demographic research might be used to identify several precincts in a city which have theoretically interesting demographic characteristics and voting patterns. These precincts could then be studied in depth using other research approaches. These approaches could be used to develop explanations and predictions of the vote in a specific election. After the election is over, the ideological/demographic approach could be used to assess the adequacy of these explanations and predictions by determining whether they "fit" voting patterns in precincts similar to those studied in depth.

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